B-1 history long lived

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(Editor's Note: This is the second article in a four-part series highlighting the 20th anniversary of the B-1 at Dyess. This week's article focuses on the historical background of the B-1. Look for next week's article, which focuses on the technological aspects of the B-1.)

Since it first made Dyess its home and training hub, the B-1 has had a well established history in West Texas, but the bomber's history actually began many years ago.

The B-1 "Lancer" had to overcome several obstacles before becoming operational and making its official debut.

A glance back at an Abilene Reporter-News article 20 years ago reveals that the day the B-1 arrived finally ended "Abilene's nine-year process of winning the right to be the home and training center for America's most sophisticated military aircraft."

"Dyess knew that they were going to be the first home of the B-1 a few years out, before the first one even got there, but the people of Abilene worked very hard to get it here," said Robert Butler, Jr., Dyess B-1 site manager.

The Lancer's history began in the 1960s when the need for a long-range conventional multi-role bomber arose to replace the B-52 Stratofortress in its Cold War role in order to deliver nuclear weapons and penetrate the Soviet defense.

The vision of the new bomber was revolutionary in every aspect, to include its design, its mission and the weapons it would carry, said George Jackson, 28th Bomb Squadron civilian B-1 instructor pilot.

"This airplane was going to be the first high and low altitude bomber that we had ever designed. It was also going to be the first high-speed, low-speed, high and low altitude-capable bomber as well as multi-purpose from the stand point of conventional and strategic weapons delivery," Jackson said.

Numerous studies conducted by the Department of Defense and the Air Force established that the new bomber design should make it able to fly at low altitudes and at high speeds. The studies also determined the new bomber would have a "swing-wing" design, which would make it capable to fly at a wide range of altitudes and airspeeds, "a capability other bombers had not been able to do," Jackson said.

The Bone would also have stealth capabilities that, combined with a relatively small radar cross-section, would make the bomber's detection very difficult. Its design would aid in its initial, nuclear-focused mission to penetrate enemy defenses and attack targets using new-generation standoff weapons.

But the bomber program had a lot of "back and forths" during its development, Butler said. Shortly after the initial development contract was awarded and progress began with the testing of the first bomber prototype, the B-1A in 1974, the program was terminated for a variety of reasons including the growing costs of the program.

However, program developers were "still flight testing (the B-1) and working the bugs out because the feeling was that we would eventually have to buy it even though the president cancelled it," Butler said. "And then (President Ronald) Reagan came, and one of the first things he did was regenerate the bomber program."

"From then on, it was like a speeding train," Butler added.

It was in 1981 when President Reagan reinstated the B-1 bomber program and designated it to produce the B-1B prototype. Despite the initial delay of being cancelled, the program began rolling again – first with the announcement that the Air Force would gain 100 B-1Bs and a contract, which was awarded to Rockwell International, to develop the bombers in 1982.

The switch from the B-1A design to the B-1B design, in addition to the nuclear deterrent role, included a limited conventional weapon capability. Other main design differences of the B-1B from the B-1A involved its speed, which changed from Mach 2.2 in the B-1A to Mach 1.25 in the B-1B as well as its maximum gross take-off weight, which increased from about 400 thousand pounds to 477 thousand pounds.

"The 'B' model was a little cheaper," Butler said. However, the B-1 would lose a bit of the "low-level, high-speed punch" that the original B-1A had.

Nonetheless, the B-1B bomber demonstrated the capabilities no other military aircraft possessed at the time. Following its first flight in October 1984, Lt. Gen. James Light, Jr., 15th Air Force commander who later spoke at the arrival ceremony of the B-1B to Dyess, fittingly asserted that those capabilities would "remain an effective weapon system well into the twenty-first century."

Then, still in October, the first B-1 bomber was delivered to the Air Force at Edwards Air Force Base, Calif., where it was flight tested, as well as locations including Carswell Air Force Base, Texas, and Rockwell's facility in Palmdale, Calif.

The big day for Dyess and Abilene came in June 29, 1985. Dyess Airmen and Abilene citizens celebrated the bomber's 1:55 p.m.-arrival over Abilene with an airshow that corralled over 45,000 people to the Dyess flightline.

But Dyess and Abilene's celebration of their long-awaited success didn't end there.

Abilene celebrated with a big barbecue – aside from the airshow – and with bumper stickers that proclaimed in big red and blue letters, "Smile Partner, You're in B-1 Country," which can still be sighted on vehicle windows and bumpers around town.

"It was the big event. It even hit the national news," Butler said.

The B-1 made its home at several other bases since including Ellsworth Air Force Base, S.D.; McConnell Air Force Base, Kan.; Robins Air Force Base, Ga.; and Mountain Home Air Force Base, Idaho.

More recently in 2001, the Air Force retired 33 B-1s and removed bombers from Mountain Home, Robins and McConnell Air Force bases, leaving the Lancer only at Dyess and Ellsworth Air Force Bases.

Airman 1st Class Alan Garrison

Weathering the storm

The Star of Abilene, the first operational B-1 bomber in the Air Force sits in the Dyess Linear Air Park as a storm approaches. This year is the 20th anniversary of the first operational B-1 bomber, the Star of Abilene, being delivered to Dyess in 1985.